

Ritch C. Savin-Williams

Adolescence: An Ethological Perspective



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Ritch C. Savin-Williams
Department of Human Development
and Family Studies
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853, U.S.A.

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**To *Francis Charles Williams* and
Joy Joan Savin Williams—they never
stopped loving**

Preface

Books on adolescence have been written for a variety of purposes. Hall's (1904) two volume *Adolescence* encompasses most of them: to advocate a particular theoretical approach to adolescence, to stimulate use of a particular brand of scientific methodology when studying youth, to address issues of the basic nature and importance of adolescence, and to propose recommendations on how adolescents ought to be treated and educated. In Hall's words, "It [the two volumes] constitutes the first attempt to bring together the various aspects of its vast and complex theme" (xix), a full survey of "pedagogic matter and method." This is necessary because, "In no psychic soil, too, does seed, bad as well as good, strike such deep root, grow so rankly, or bear fruit so quickly or so surely" (xviii-xix).

Mead (1928) retorted with *Coming of Age in Samoa*, a refutation of Hall's conclusions: "Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture" (p. 11). Thus, Mead wanted to correct a theoretical injustice and to promote the impact that culture has on the developing adolescent personality.

Hollingshead's (1949) *Elmtown's Youth* was produced to further support Mead's conclusions—"Is the social behavior of an adolescent a function of physiological changes in the maturing individual or of his experiences in society?" (p. 6). His answer was clearly the latter, specifically the family's economic and social status within Elmtown's social structure. Kiell (1964) countered both Mead and Hollingshead in *The Universal Experience of Adolescence*: "The present book attempts to demonstrate the universalities in adolescence as far back in history and in as many literate cultures as there are records" (p. 9). Inner turmoil and external behavioral disorder are characteristic of all adolescents and are "only moderately affected by cultural determinants" (p. 9).

Others joined the fray, writing supporting or contradicting books. The actors now strayed from the psychology versus sociology/anthropology disciplines to include historians, educators, ethologists, and social

psychologists. For example, Kett (1977) wrote *Rites of Passage* to document the “polymorphism” of the social experience of youth, to trace the social forces and cultural moral values that have shaped youth, and to provide a historical perspective of the biases and distortions that have led to various societal responses to youth. The nature of adolescence and the causes of that nature have provided the major impetus for many of the most frequently cited books on adolescence. The goal is to present a more representative (Douvan & Adelson, 1966) or normal (Offer, 1969) sample of adolescents than that traditionally offered (e.g., Blos, 1962).

Books on adolescents may also serve to warn “society” of impending social doom unless the education of adolescents and their development are altered. Real adolescents are vanishing because they are being crushed by an insensitive adult world. Friedenberg (1959) wrote to describe adolescence as it is—a dumping ground for our cultural problems—and the way it should be: Adolescents need a clear and disciplined way of facing themselves and the world. In *The Adolescent Society* Coleman (1961) alerted parents and high schools that ignoring youth has resulted in a peer socialization process that severs adolescents from adult society and adult moral values. Schools should better implement the hopes and ideals of our society; if not, doom is inevitable.

Other books on adolescence were written to further a particular methodological approach. *The Jack Roller* (Shaw, 1930) illustrates how a delinquent boy’s own subjective point of view of the events and sequences of social and cultural situations is essential to understand his life history, for both theoretical and therapeutic reasons. *Being Adolescent* (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) promotes the Experience Sampling Method (paging device, beeper) as a technique of describing “... what it is to be an adolescent from the inside, by letting teenagers tell us what they do, feel, and hope for as they go about their daily rounds ...” (p. xiv).

These theoretical, methodological, and moral exhortations are also addressed in the current volume. But, they do not constitute the major purpose. Rather, Thrasher (1927) stated the purpose best some 60 years ago in his preface to *The Gang*: “The Study is primarily an exploratory survey designed to reveal behavior-trends and to present a general picture of life in an area little understood by the average citizen. It is hoped that the book will encourage additional study in this field and indicate some interesting lines for further research” (p. xi). I would add, “little understood by the average researcher or theorist of adolescence.”

My intent in writing this book is to share with you research that will provide an unfortunately rare perspective of adolescents and of adolescence. I make no claim that the participating adolescents are normal or representative of anything. There is no reliance on new methodological ploys; rather, psychology’s most basic procedure, observations of behavior, is used. This method of yielding information emerges in a

long-standing controversy; although most recognize that the naturalistic observation of behavior has merit, few engage in such activity. Finally, the research does not prove that adolescents are calm or conflicted or for what reason, whether physiological or cultural. But there is, to be honest, an orientation to emphasize the human typicality of adolescents and to interpret their behavior in an ethological, biological perspective. These points will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The major personality and social issues addressed in this volume involve competitive and cooperative behavior among adolescents in naturalistic settings, with an emphasis on contextual, age, and sex variations. This interest began quite accidentally during my sophomore year in the psychology department at the University of Missouri. I was assigned to Dr. Robert Boice to assist with his research on dominance behavior among frogs. My task was to drop meal worms into pens of frogs, recording who ate when and who did what to whom. It was easy money in an air conditioned atmosphere inhabited by white rats, mice, marine toads, turtles, prairie dogs, and graduate students. But the job soon became an entry into scientific inquiry that was further developed in a biology of behavior class with Dr. Daniel G. Freedman in Human Development at the University of Chicago. Dr. Freedman's discussion of dominance hierarchy spanned many species but was limited, by virtue of the literature, to studies of children among humans. Yet, based on my experiences with adolescents at summer camp, the kinds of behaviors and structures discussed in the literature on frogs and children also appeared to characterize humans older than grade school age. My task was to document these impressions with a methodology based on observing behavior in naturalistic settings and with a theoretical perspective based on the tenets of ethology.

These views of methodology and development shaped the research and the analysis reported in this book. But I fear the data will do little to advance the field because of long-standing resistance of counter views. The studies are exploratory and they survey the range of adolescent competitive behaviors. They provide data that may be useful in a biosocial theoretical stance that incorporates an ethological perspective. Perhaps further research will be stimulated that will add more pieces to the picture of the natural adolescent's life.

I owe much gratitude to my fellow observers of adolescents, who also frequently served as co-authors of professional papers: Janet Bare Ashear, Joyce Canaan, Cathy Hannum, Birdy Paikoff, Debby Pool, Steve Small, Tom Spiegelhalter, Susan Spinola, Carol Walcer, and Shep Zeldin. The participating youth were always a joy to observe; in all cases they had the easiest task: to be themselves. A far more difficult task was to type the results of these observations. In this task Vicki Griffin was most dedicated, even discovering humor in the manuscript. When her fingers were bleeding profusely, Shawn Lovelace came to the rescue to spell her

during times of healing. Colleagues assisted in a number of ways, from critical comments to statistical assistance. My thanks to Brad Brown, John Condry, Steve Cornelius, Mike Csikszentmihalyi, Gunhild Hagestad, Bob Johnston, Mort Lieberman, Martha McClintock, Don Omark, Rick Richards, Glenn Weisfeld and the many unnamed journal reviewers.

I suspect that much of the content of this book will seem commonplace, even obvious to you. If so, then it is confirmed that it borders on truth. For readers who have spent time with youth in contexts in which the youth choose to be, you will rediscover special memories, experiences, and knowledge. My attempt here is to recreate the obvious, for purposes of science and for those who educate youth. I want this book's major contribution to be the rekindling of knowledge and the rediscovery of an ancient behavioral science methodology. Perhaps you will welcome this book as an effort that you wished you had undertaken.

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A Research Agenda

As a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s it was personally comforting but professionally disheartening to realize the ease with which one could claim that he or she had read the major theoretical and empirical literature on adolescence. In the mid-1980s there are few, including myself, who would make this same claim because of the radical increase in volumes devoted to adolescence. Although I cease to be personally comforted, I am still professionally disheartened because the increased quantity of output has not been accompanied by a parallel increase in descriptive foundation research that is necessary for a field of study to evolve in a healthy, scientific manner. In this chapter I will review recent proposals for future research agendas for studying adolescence; all essentially ignore this point. In response to them, an alternate research agenda is proposed that argues for an ethological approach to the study of adolescence. This back-to-the-basics agenda is partially fulfilled by the remaining chapters of this manuscript.

Reviewing Research Agendas

The Adolescence of Adolescence Research

During the last two decades there has been more than a simple incremental increase in research on adolescence, and this has been duly noted by a number of recent reviews projecting the future research agenda for the field of adolescence (Berzonsky, 1983; Grinder 1982; Hill, 1982 & 1983; Lerner, 1981). This awakening can be easily documented by counting the number of journal pages that address issues of adolescent development, the journals devoted exclusively to adolescence, the conferences and programs at regional and national meetings that focus on issues of adolescence, funding sources for the study of adolescents (most usually problematic youth), and adolescent textbooks, new and revised, published in recent years (Berzonsky, 1983; Hill, 1982; Lerner,

1981). There is a *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (Adelson, 1980), a biennial national conference on adolescence that first met in Tucson in 1982 (Thornburg & Thornburg, 1983), and a Society for Research on Adolescence that was organized in 1984 and met for the first time in March, 1986 at Madison, Wisconsin. Grinder (1982) and Hill (1983) note that the range of topics covered has also grown rapidly as disciplines other than psychology and sociology have contributed to the study of adolescence. Two new books on adolescence illustrate the inter- and multi-disciplinary approach to critical issues of these new scholars of adolescence. Brumberg (in press) focuses on a typically biomedical issue, the fasting of adolescent girls, from a social historical perspective and Hamilton (in preparation) evaluates the cross-cultural educational and work programs for youth of West Germany and the United States.

In his summary of the First Biennial Conference on Adolescent Research, Blyth (1983) reported that many of those present felt that the study of adolescence had moved out of its infancy and childhood and was in its own adolescence, with an appropriate identity crisis:

We are neither true believers in the omnipotence of earlier theorists and researchers nor are we satisfied being rebels who seek simply to disprove the perspectives of previous generations. Rather we are moving beyond these acts of rebellion toward a more complete, complex, and diversified sense of what adolescent development is all about. While we are far from having a mature science of adolescent development, we are moving beyond traditional views toward a new more integrated and testable view. (pp. 157-158)

In some sense the publication of the *Handbook* was a rite of passage (Lerner, 1981), moving the field beyond past theoretical and methodological limitations:

In sum, given the current and potential transitions in the theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of adolescent development, it may be fair to say that the study of adolescence is itself in its adolescence. Although traditional unidisciplinary, often atheoretical, unidirectional, and methodologically univariate and historically insensitive work is still conducted, there is an emergence of new conceptualizations, to be tested by an historically different array of data collection and analysis strategies—these will be used by a cohort of scientists newly concerned with this period for what it can reveal about basic developmental phenomena. (p. 259)

With this explosion of interest and the increase in doctrinaire positions, current researchers employ adolescent subjects not only because of the convenience of such populations, but also because they have a genuine interest in the development of adolescents.

There are, however, additional research responsibilities that must be assumed if the field is to advance beyond its adolescence into its adulthood (Hill, 1983). The research agendas proposed by these writers reflect their best judgment of the future for the study of adolescence.

Many of the issues discussed here have been identified by nearly all reviewers. I limit my consideration of proposals to those that have been presented since 1980.

Longitudinal Research

One of the outstanding contributions to the *Handbook* is the extended chapter by Livson and Peskin (1980), who argue for the continued significance of longitudinal research in studying adolescence. Others (Adams, 1983; Berzonsky, 1983; Blyth, 1983; Hill, 1983; Jorgensen, 1983; Savin-Williams & Demo 1983) agree, placing top priority on this research method for future research on adolescence.

Many note the importance of the early California longitudinal studies. Elder (1980) and Livson and Peskin (1980) have been most vocal in this respect, and yet such studies need replication and expansion. Few have or are willing to undertake such projects, for a variety of reasons that are believed to limit the usefulness and practicality of longitudinal research designs: publication pressures, low short-term payoff, atheoretical perspective, inefficiency, lack of methodological rigor, cost. Livson and Peskin (1980) present convincing arguments for the speciousness of these projected limitations and propose, as do Adams (1983) and Berzonsky (1983), shortcuts that include retrospective reports and a variety of sequential—cohort, time, and cross—methods.

Longitudinal studies are essential if adolescence is to be placed within a life course perspective that considers not only the precursors of adolescence and the outcomes of childhood, but also predicts adult development (Lerner, 1981; Livson & Peskin, 1980). Whether one's concern is with the stability of psychological traits over time, such as self-esteem (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983), or how contextual factors, such as the family, result in changes in psychological states (Hill, 1983), longitudinal research strategies are invaluable.

Despite the myriad problems inherent with the longitudinal perspective, few would disagree with its significance for the future study of adolescence. It will be retrospectively interesting in the near future to pay homage to the brave researchers who overcame the handicaps cited above to study youth within a longitudinal time frame.

Multi-Method, Multi-Trait, Multi-Variate Analysis

Because method variance is usually greater than person variance, single measures and single methods of assessing adolescent personality are extremely suspect (Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983). Past research has relied too heavily on (abused) surveys and questionnaires, which are most useful if employed in conjunction with other, more diverse and

personal research strategies, such as participant and non-participant observations, interviews, projective techniques, and other innovative forms (e.g., paging devices to elicit repeated self-report measures used by Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Although traditional research approaches may be appropriate for some questions, descriptive, correlational, and ethnographic methods should also be more fully explored (Adams, 1983; Blyth, 1983; Thornburg, 1983). In the classroom ethnographic observation of behavior would complement the abundant educationally based research that has relied almost exclusively on self-report data (Thornburg, 1983).

Hill (1983) argues for a better conceptualization of variables (e.g., "identity") and a more accurate measurement of research dimensions. In addition, Blyth (1983) and Livson and Peskin (1980) advocate an increased use of multivariate techniques of data analysis that allow the data to reveal potentially unexpected relationships, and that permit "the data to reveal whatever threads of predictability do exist, whether or not these threads involve the same or different personality characteristics at the predicting and outcome ages". (Livson & Peskin, 1980: p. 89)

These methodological approaches are mandatory, many of the reviewers maintain, if our future conceptualization and measurement of adolescence are to be multi-dimensional and more accessible to capturing the wholeness and complexity of the lives of adolescents. One-shot, single-measure research strategies produce transient results that have low explanatory power and are unable to further our understanding of adolescence.

Through the Eyes of the Adolescent

Jorgensen (1983) argues for an increased consideration of the phenomenological aspects of adolescent development. In regard to sexuality, the researcher should seek to understand the meaning of sexual development and sexual behavior through the eyes of the adolescent—how she or he experiences sexuality, interprets it, gives it meaning, and acts on it. In other areas, such as emotions, motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions, future research must sample the adolescent experiences from the world. The adolescent should be asked the meaning of an event, including potentially emotional issues such as puberty (Petersen, Tobin-Richards, & Boxer, 1983).

The Contextual Quality

Future research should continue to clarify the extent and meaning of contextual influences on adolescent development. The individual's

personal sense of identity is affected by his or her external existence; several of the reviewers assert that we know far more about the traits of adolescents—their stable, enduring characteristics—than we know about how adolescent behavior is affected by both immediate and historical contexts (Berzonsky, 1983; Blyth, 1983; Hill, 1983). The request is for more socially, ecologically based research that demonstrates how different environmental conditions affect adolescent development (Adams, 1983; Blyth, 1983; Grinder, 1982). Ecological psychologists (Schoggen, 1978) advocate behavioral setting analysis; social psychologists (Bandura, 1978) stress the dynamics of the person-situation interaction.

Peer groups have received the bulk of the attention; familial influences on adolescents need considerably more study (Hill, 1983). Future research must also consider the larger, socio-cultural effects on adolescent behavior (Lerner, 1981). Elder (1980) stresses the historical context; Jorgensen (1983) notes the interface of sociostructural variables such as cultural values on adolescent sexuality; and Thornburg (1983) believes more research should be conducted in schools, especially considering the varieties of inter-school differences (e.g., size).

The influence of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) proposals for the ecology of human development has been and will continue to be felt by the field of adolescence. Whether the context is immediate or historical, reviewers of research agendas have called for increased attention to how the quality of adolescent life is affected by the contexts in which she or he lives. Taken alone, however, this concern is ultimately not sufficient because the adolescent also rebounds and affects the contexts. Livson and Peskin (1980) point out that when we study adolescents and their parents, both the research subject (the adolescent) and the context (parents) have developmental needs that are interwoven. Future research must consider the person, the context, and their interaction.

Intra-Individual Influences

An individual's growth patterns are influenced by parallel and interacting developments occurring simultaneously within the individual. For example, much of the research on pubescence has considered puberty primarily as an independent variable—usually as an event—influencing various aspects of personality and social development of adolescents. In the future, pubescence should also be considered as a dependent, continuous variable that is affected by the individual's physical behavior, such as athletic participation (Hill 1983).

Petersen, Tobin-Richards, and Boxer (1983) note that the direct effect of pubertal processes on cognitive development needs to be explored; Jorgensen (1983) stresses the impact of puberty and its timing on sexual

development; and Hill (1983) gives several examples of unresearched areas of intra-individual development: eating and behavior, cognition and social development, and gender role and pubertal development. Perhaps the largest void, according to Hill (1983), is the connection between intra-individual change and social transitions such as movement into high school.

As this section and the preceding one indicate, studying adolescents can no longer be considered to be a simple subject X “direct effects” paradigm. Rather, multiple and complex changes occurring within the individual affect each other and they, in turn, influence and are influenced by contextual processes, transitions, and events occurring on the outside. For example, to study the adolescent-family interaction, it is necessary to consider changes occurring within the adolescent (pubescence, cognition) and each of the parents (generativity and independence needs) as well as larger socio-cultural concerns (attitudes toward family-adolescent conflict). Each of these, in turn, affects the others; for example, a cultural attitude that promotes the norm of conflict within the family may heighten the parents’ concern that every slight, normal intra-family conflict is a precursor to delinquency that may, as a result, cause the adolescent to feel increased stress when with the family. So, he or she thus spends more time with peers, learns delinquent activities, rejects the parents and their cultural values, becomes a drug addict, etc.

Life Span

All adolescents have a developmental history, and for most individuals adolescence will eventually become a part of that history. Future research needs to examine childhood precursors of adolescent processes and adult outcomes (Berzonsky, 1983). Developmentalists should study not only short-term effects of their favorite variables, but also the long-term effects of particular events or processes that happen to an adolescent.

Just as early adolescence researchers argued that development does not end in the Freudian childhood, so, too, must future adolescence researchers recognize that development does not end at adolescence (Livson & Peskin, 1980). This life span approach assumes that adolescents are not static beings without a past or a future (Lerner, 1981).

Theory-Research-Application Balance

Perhaps in reaction to the early clinical, psychiatric orientation to the study of adolescence, there has been a tendency among adolescence

researchers to become extremely empirical. As a result, much of the research is fragmented with little relevance beyond a limited scope (Thornburg, 1983).

First, there was abundant theory with little empirical research; now, most empirical research is atheoretical (Lerner, 1981). It is not that we need more research, but that we need more theoretically based research (Grinder, 1982). Much of the “theory” that is applied or tested is more conventional wisdom or intuition than sophisticated, systematic theory.

To advance toward a productive future the field must move beyond theoretical and empirical limitations—not so much to repudiate the past as to offer new, interdisciplinary views that encourage a diverse and broad understanding (Blyth, 1983). Popular stereotypes or theories that portray adolescents as society’s misfits offer little hope for an increased opportunity to reconceptualize the developments of adolescence.

In a similar manner, no longer can the fields of basic and applied research afford to be divorced from each other. Practitioners must identify their research needs and the researchers must articulate their research interests and interpret their findings to those concerned with theoretical and applied issues (Thornburg, 1983). Both the practitioner and the scientist must, in turn, communicate with the policy makers who have the power to influence the lives of adolescents both directly and indirectly.

Setting a Research Agenda

The research agendas proposed by these reviewers for the study of adolescence offer quite substantial methodological, theoretical, and empirical considerations that are appropriate goals for the study of adolescence, as well as for other times during the life course. The point of departure for this book is its emphasis on two subsets of these concerns: (1) The methodological procedures by which one comes to know the critical and fundamental issues of adolescence and (2) a conceptualization of adolescence that is congruent with an ethological perspective. The former will help to establish a base level of knowledge for the normative occurrence of behavioral phenomena and the latter will offer a theoretical alternative to many of the established explanations of adolescent behavior. In the process of addressing these two issues the research reported here will also underscore the importance of a longitudinal, multi-method and multi-trait research design that is ecologically sensitive to the reality of adolescent life. In noting some of the past methodological and conceptual shortcomings of the field of adolescence, I want to